

News from the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services



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OPINION EDITORIAL

MTBE Ban is Good News For Environment

NHDES Commissioner Thomas Burack

As the new Commissioner of New Hampshire's Department of Environmental Services, I am happy to be able to report some good news. Starting this month, the state's gasoline supply became cleaner and better for the environment. That is because starting January 1, 2007, gasoline containing MtBE (short for Methyl tertiary Butyl Ether) and certain other ethers is banned from our gasoline supplies. This change is thanks to a state law passed in 2005, RSA 146-G.

MtBE, used as an octane enhancer since the 1970's, has been added by refiners in increasing amounts to gasoline since 1995 as a way to reduce vehicle emissions and improve air quality. The problem is that MtBE is a product that easily contaminates groundwater because it can escape even tight underground storage tanks, spreads far and fast in underground aquifers and resists cleanup. State studies show that more than one-third of public water supplies in our most heavily populated counties contain some level of MtBE. The pervasive nature of the problem led the Attorney General to file a lawsuit against major oil producers in 2003. In the face of increasing contamination rates and a recalcitrant oil industry, the legislature decided to ban the product from the state altogether. The ban is not a cure, but it is a good start along a road to recovery for one of our most precious resources – the groundwater we rely upon for drinking water.

What does this mean for the average consumer? The transition away from MtBE occurred smoothly with little impact on consumers. The ban has not caused any significant changes in gasoline cost or supply. Price volatility and supply disruptions, although predicted by some, have not occurred. From a health-related perspective, air pollution requirements have not changed because fuel manufacturers merely substituted ethanol for MtBE in order to meet those requirements. From a water supply perspective, the ban will help prevent further MtBE contamination of groundwater. However, it will not address the MtBE that has already been released into our groundwater and that continues to threaten water supplies.

The Department of Environmental Services is actively involved in addressing the consequences of the oil industry's decision to add MtBE to our gasoline. We are monitoring underground aquifers that we know have been contaminated and are working to replace or provide treatment for water supplies rendered undrinkable. State reimbursement funds, such as the Gasoline Remediation and Elimination of Ethers Fund established under state law, have provided an important source of funding to address MtBE contamination. More than 200 private drinking water wells have been provided with treatment systems and miles of water line extensions have been funded.

The department has also been proactive in reminding fuel suppliers of the ban. We wrote to suppliers in December 2006 to remind them of the January 1, 2007 effective date. We have sampled and analyzed some gasoline supplies. Suppliers are also being made aware that they cannot sell conventional gasoline in the four southern counties due to air pollution concerns. Gasoline sold in Rockingham, Strafford, Hillsborough and Merrimack Counties must still meet the emissions reduction requirements for clean burning gasoline without using MtBE or other banned ethers. Most gasoline supplied in New Hampshire today contains ethanol or another approved oxygenate that meets federal fuel specifications for areas that have not attained air quality standards and that complies with the state ban.

New Hampshire's legislature has provided the Department of Environmental Services with many tools to protect our environment. The MtBE ban may prove to be one of the most significant in recent years.

Thomas Burack is the Commissioner of New Hampshire's Department of Environmental Services

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